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ABSTRACT

In any number of ways, white colleges and universities stunt the development of black students on their campuses. Curriculum designed by and for the various white ethnic cultures very seldom prepares black students to handle issues and to relate effectively to members of the black community. Methods, textbooks, and materials are still overwhelmingly "white" in spite of studies in black heritage. Black students on white campuses also face the difficulty of being evaluated fairly for their work. Standards of grading are either lowered or raised to the detriment of the black students. White institutions have made little attempt to provide an adequate program for transition and adjustment into the white university world for black students. Counseling services neither understand nor are sensitive to the needs of blacks on campus. Black students should be apprised of the situation at white colleges as it really is, and decide which institution is best for them--a black institution that may be having survival problems, or a white institution where blacks must undertake the responsibility of evolving the institution into a multiracial, pluralistic academic community. (Author/PG)

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CRITIQUE

A Quarterly Memorandum

The Center for the Study of Higher Education

The University of Toledo

EDITORIAL OPINION

By mid-1972, the plethora of articles, research reports, and books concerning the minority group student in higher education, fortunately or unfortunately, is lessening. While two years ago one could hardly attend any professional meeting anywhere without hearing reports on "Disadvantaged Students," "Black Studies," etc., the urgency of those meetings seems strangely dissipated today However, the black student on the campuses of most colleges and universities, irrespective of geographic location, still remains under-representated while, at the same time, the institutions and their faculties continue to be uncertain as to how best to provide for his particular needs.

If there is but one conclusion concerning all of the past literature and rhetoric over the black student on campus, it is clearly that higher education in general is still quite uncertain as to how it might meet the particular needs of the contemporary minority group student. Strangely enough, the same is also true concerning the student from any atypical group—the farm boy who seems lost, the wealthy kid who constantly must escape in his Porsche, the middle-class youth who is bored, etc.

Who should do the adjusting — the atypical students or the college? After reading Professor Buncombe's essay, ask yourself that particular question as it relates to your specific institution with your particular atypical students, whoever they might be.

WFH

BLACK STUDENTS ON WHITE CAMPUSES: DAMAGED GOODS

Marie H. Buncombe*

In any number of ways, white colleges and universities stunt the development of black students on their campuses. If we look at the curriculum, the methods of grading, the student services, and the social programs, we must conclude ultimately that black students really do not get the chance to realize their fullest potential at white centers of learning and probably never will. As one student expressed it:

> "The only advantages of being on this white campus I can see are that, first, I am learning the ways of white folks from the inside and thus how to deal with the enemy, one might say; and, second, I can acquire basic skills — if I work extra hard at it — which I might find useful in order to survive in this racist society. But still, the price is too high; it is almost more than I can stand. The hassles are hardly worth it; for I am tired, angry, and depressed just about all the time trying to stay on top of everything."

And that is what this discussion is all about: the high price blacks have to pay at white schools for damaged goods in return.

There is nothing sadder than seeing black students deeply disappointed when their newly acquired Black studies or cultural centers and programs — hastily established only two or three years ago to quiet their persistent, vociferous, and sometimes violent demands—crumble before their eyes as they are now doing across the country. With such claims that finances, which were limited at the outset, are drying up; that qualified black teachers are hard to find; that the curriculum in Black studies is shaky at best; and that not enough students (black or white) have enrolled to maintain the courses; administrations in colleges across the land have abandoned black culture programs. The institutions had no intention of making these programs a permanent part of American education or of becoming in essence a multicultural, pluralistic society. The black students, the victims of another cruel hoax, as a result are left again alienated, bewildered, apathetic. Out of this confusion

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they must pick up the pieces of what is left of their pride and dignity and somehow continue to cope with a society (of which the white campus is a microcosm) that insists upon branding them as "minorities" (i.e., inferiors).

First, let us consider the academic program at the schools. The curriculum is designed by and for the various white ethnic cultures of the United States with almost total emphasis on the contributions of the western Anglo-Saxon Judeo-Christian civilization, and only token, if any, acknowledgment of the efforts of other, particularly nonwhite cultures that are usually introduced as primitive, bizarre, exotic, quaint, entertaining, and "interesting." The curriculum very seldom prepares black students to handle issues and to relate effectively to members of the black community from which they come and to which they must return. Curriculum "innovators," for example, do not address themselves too frequently to the content of their programs that would substantially overhaul the system to make it truly relevant to a pluralistic, multicultural, polychrome society; rather, futile debates go on endlessly about "open curriculum" or no requirements, a "flexible core" or many options among the same old course offerings, and the traditional "general education" studies. That these are merely superficial and not substantive changes seems to escape the "innovators." Actually, it makes no real difference how the program is arranged or even how it is taught, for the most part; the product comes out precisely the same: white, Euro-American, Judeo-Christian cultural supremacy.

Blacks, as well as other students outside the white cultural ghettos, submit to relentless whitewash and indoctrination. Textbooks, materials, and methods still are overwhelmingly "white" in spite of a grudging nod to studies in the Black heritage during the past few years. Textbook salesmen continue to peddle their publishers' anthologies of American literature, for instance, which persist in perpetuating the myth that only white poets, dramatists, novelists, essayists, and historians, with the exception of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka), Malcolm X, and Eldridge Cleaver have had anything to say about blacks and whites on the American scene. White professors still use the very flimsy excuse that because their own training has not included any knowledge of the Black experience, they are not prepared to teach such material. While it is true that one would prefer that the ignorant not venture forth into an area where they are least competent, it is reprehensible for a true scholar to use ignorance as an excuse for not entering into unexplored fields that should have been part of his education and to continue to present a distorted, or at best, an incomplete view of the world. Indeed, it is inconceivable that sincere scholars of Euro-American literature and history cannot use the same discipline and tools of scholarship to learn about and teach Afro-American, Mexican-American, Asian-American, or native American culture. What is deplored is their reluctance to exert the same effort and to approach with the same respect the nonwhite cultural heritage that is reserved for the white. Black students are truly resentful of the white professors who treat the Black heritage with disdain, insignificance, and incompetence. For this reason mainly, they demand black professors to teach Black studies; the students simply do not trust their white teachers to deal fairly and fully with their culture. Those white professors committed to honest scholarship and truth can teach Black studies, even as black professors of the same caliber and dedication are able to teach studies of the white cultures.

Another problem facing the black students on white campuses is the difficulty of being evaluated fairly and meaningfully for their work. Standards of grading either are lowered or raised to the detriment of the black students, rather than to the detriment of the white ones, as commonly feared and claimed. Very easy grading too frequently is the case for marginal or poor students. Far too often the assumption is made that all blacks come from culturally, economically, and educationally deprived homes; thus none of them can be expected to achieve the standards of the white middle-class suburban students. In other words, the black students are seldom seen as individuals with particular problems that are as varied as those of white students, except when it is convenient for the institution to make distinctions to determine the "good" ones from the "bad" ones, or the "militant" ones from the "moderate" ones. For instance, since at one college in particular black students and financial aid are usually spoken of in the same breath, it came as a complete surprise to everyone, students and faculty alike, when it was revealed that only one-fourth of the black students were receiving financial aid from the college. All previous discussions had led to the belief that no less than three out of four were getting help. The same habit of lumping all blacks together assumes that all of them are equally ignorant of white Euro-American culture and are products of large inner-city black ghetto schools that are overcrowded jungles.

Not until very recently, we must remember, have a few institutions gone to an "open admissions" policy in an effort to offer equal opportunity

for higher education to all of the citizens of the country. But by no means have the majority of white schools done so; consequently, most white campuses have very few black students who have not been exposed to white Americans. Even though most black students score poorly on scholastic aptitude tests, all evidence points to the fact that the tests measure socioeconomic cultural values, judgments, and information rather than academic potential. Thus the common grouping of all black students under one label leads white professors to patronize and expect less of the blacks in their classes. They, as a result, often are tempted to lower the standards for the poor students, or just as insidiously, they grade the superior ones who perform well more stringently than is called for. The students are soon aware that many professors already have made up their minds at the beginning of the course about their performance. The burden is then left up to them to disprove the preconceived notions. To make an "A" instead of the usual "B" reserved for superior work by blacks, they have to work twice as hard. Even then, they may receive the "B" with the comment that "this is a good grade from me; you just didn't quite make it on the final exam (or that paper, or discussion, or whatever)." Implicit in the remark is, "You ought to be grateful for that 'B'! No blacks could be 'A' students in my class."

In addition, the less aggressive, more reserved black students have often been considered less bright and are graded accordingly, while the vociferous militants have used intimidation to extort respectable grades for inferior and inadequate work. From all angles, the black students come out the losers. Fair, meaningful evaluation is almost nonexistent, and the students are left frustrated, discouraged, and insecure.

Besides being academically crippling for black students, white institutions of higher learning make very little attempt to provide an adequate program for transition and adjustment into the new closed white world where the students are more invisible and outnumbered than they are in the larger outside society. Precious few campuses have anywhere near the same proportion of blacks among their student bodies as exists in the total population of the United States where they make up 11.2 per cent. "For higher educational opportunity," as Stephen J. Wright notes in *The Journal of Higher Education*,

> ". . . is a purchasable commodity and as long as one-third of the black population, for example, is below the poverty line and the median annual income is only 64 per cent that of the white population, there will continue to be fewer blacks preparing for the higher vocations and professions."[1]

After the admissions office percentage ("quotas" is no longer an acceptable term) is met, the students are on their own to cope with the innumerable problems in the new, hostile society. They have been selected and screened in terms of what they can contribute to the institution, rather than in terms of what the school can offer them. If the students prove to be too independent, aggressive, and "militant," then they are passed up for more manageable, middle-income students who conform to the white norm. If the standards on aptitude tests are lowered to allow for an "open admissions" policy, adequate remedial services seldom are offered to give students a chance to strengthen academic skills and study habits. For those institutions trying to improve their image, it becomes increasingly difficult to turn down black applicants whose chance of success is at best dubious.

Counseling services, moreover, run by white professionals or laymen who neither understand nor are sensitive to the needs of the blacks on campus, also leave much to be desired. The students are reluctant to reveal too much of their inner selves to unsympathetic, insensitive ears. They are self-conscious about personal matters, inhibited in class discussions, and neglected in health services both on and off campuses located in isolated, closed white communities. They, therefore, have many problems that they do not feel free to discuss.

Probably the most persistent worry of the indigent black students is financial difficulty. Aid may be offered the entering students for the first year as a lure for recruitment; but for subsequent years they are told that the funds have dried up. Work-study opportunities are not nearly enough to go around to all who need them. The black students from middle-income families, along with their white counterparts from the same income bracket, find that they are not poor enough to qualify for financial aid designated for those at the poverty line and below and not affluent enough to pay their own way entirely. Consequently, just about all of the blacks come to feel like welfare clients; they either are stuck in the program because they cannot afford to leave after the investment of money and time (especially if they have taken out loans), or they drop out. Blacks may constitute up to five per cent of the freshman class in a given institution, but they almost never make up more than one-half of one per cent of the graduating class. They are victimized and trapped by the system.

[1] "Redressing the Imbalance of Minority Groups in the Professions," **The Journal of Higher Education,** XLIII (March, 1972), p. 243.

Finally, the blacks on white campuses are forced to set up their own social and cultural activities. The proliferation of "black houses," "black dormitories," and "black tables" in dining halls and cafeterias on most white campuses is indication that their opportunities for a reasonable social life are indeed very scarce. And woe unto the student who does not wish to affiliate with the organized black group on campus and yet who feels alienated from the white college community! Recent studies show that blacks are joining national black college fraternities in unprecedented numbers at white institutions. As one report states:

> At large Northern institutions outside urban areas, the fraternity has become a refuge for black students who feel alienated and remote from a prevailing campus culture dominated by whites . . . Moreover, black fraternities at prestige Northern schools stress a brand of social activism that extends beyond the campus and graduation . . .[2]

Thus, in spite of what is usually considered middle-class elitism in both black and white college settings, black fraternities, because their graduate chapters have always assumed economic and social leadership roles in black communities, have been able to increase their membership 50 to 100 per cent since 1960 by capitalizing on the political awareness, social activism, and open hostilities of the blacks on white campuses. These activities exist, after all, because the black students have to compensate for what seems to be readily available to white students, who, on the whole, are attending schools designed ideally to serve their wants and to help them to realize their goals. The blacks, on the other hand, are living and working in a situation that is basically inimical to their needs and aspirations. They must have their own cultural values reinforced.

What advice does one have for the black students going to college today? They first should be apprised of the situation at white colleges as they really are rather than as their catalogues or their recruiters claim they are. They should be fairly warned that they cannot expect white institutions to become black institutions; for it does not serve the interest or purpose of the white schools to do so, not even at publicly supported schools where ostensibly the public needs are served.

Finally, they should decide which is best for them — a black institution, which is likely to be having problems trying to survive, or a white institution where the blacks must undertake the responsibility and task of making it evolve into a pluralistic, multiracial, polychrome academic community. If this becomes the goal of the institution, there will no longer be the need to designate it as a "white" school, which barely tolerates and accommodates "minority" groups or programs. For the whole community obviously will think of itself as being composed of several minorities—religious, racial, sexual, political, and cultural. Thus "white" campuses with "minority" students will disappear. As long as the term "minority" is used to distinguish the powerless and oppressed from the oppressors, who derive their supremacy and power solely from being identified with the mighty majority in this country, then the black students will always be reminded of their inferiority and be treated accordingly in the white colleges they attend, even as they are in the larger society. They can expect to continue to pay a high premium for psychological and intellectual damage that they can ill afford.

[2] "Blacks Joining Fraternities Despite White Elite Image," **The Dayton Daily News**, Friday, June 2, 1972, p. 55.

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